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### Deposited in DRO:

07 April 2015

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Smith, R.D. (2013) 'A strange condition of things : alterity and knowingness in Dickens' 'David Copperfield'.', *Educational philosophy and theory*, 45 (4). pp. 371-382.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2012.718144>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor Francis Group in *Educational Philosophy and Theory: Incorporating ACCESS* on 28/09/2012, available online at:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00131857.2012.718144>.

### Additional information:

Special Issue: Shifting Focus: Strangers and Strangeness in Literature and Education

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# A strange condition of things: alterity and knowingness in Dickens' *David Copperfield*

Richard Smith

## ABSTRACT

It is sometimes said that we are strangers to ourselves, bearers of internal alterity, as well as to each other. The profounder this strangeness then the greater the difficulty of giving any systematic account of it without paradox: of supposing that our obscurity to ourselves can readily be illuminated. To attempt such an account, in defiance of the paradox, is to risk knowingness: a condition which, appearing to challenge our alterity but in fact often confirming it, holds an ambiguous place in the 'ethics of belief' and has largely escaped philosophical attention. Like alterity, knowingness can only be approached indirectly. Charles Dickens, in *David Copperfield*, is exemplary in the way he handles these themes.

Keywords: alterity, knowingness, psychoanalysis, the unconscious, Freud, Charles Dickens

# A strange condition of things: alterity and knowingness in Dickens' *David Copperfield*

## I Introduction

The narrator of Dickens' *David Copperfield* begins the novel which takes his name as follows:

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously. (Dickens 1974, p. 49)

How odd it is: as if the mature David, looking back over his life as he begins his autobiography, would not know how that life had turned out, at least up to the point where he began to write about it. Or as if Dickens himself, whom we may suppose to be omniscient about the character of his own creation, started the novel with no idea of how it would proceed. Or, if the novel is semi-autobiographical, as if Dickens was similarly in the dark about how things had in fact gone for him. And yet the second sentence starts, it seems, with the firmest claim to representational veracity: these opening words mirror 'the beginning of my life', and the narrator offers us precision of day and hour, recording it as fact on the basis of testimony ('as I have been informed') and good faith ('... and believe'). The close match between 'life' as text and 'life' as lived is echoed and, as it may seem, confirmed by the simultaneity between the striking of the clock and the crying of baby David, or perhaps 'Dickens' if we read the novel as autobiographical and David as somehow standing for the 'Charles Dickens' whom the author is here constructing, representing or implying. Thus the paragraph both lays claim to accuracy and admits the profoundest uncertainty. Even where the claim to accuracy is most insistent, in the

recording of the time and day of birth, an eerie note is sounded by this particular time and day: being born on a Friday at midnight, according to folklore, the baby will have the ability to see ghosts and spirits, and is destined to be unlucky.

The claim to hyperbolic accuracy might be read as if it were a repudiation of the haunted uncertainty which is the dominant note of the opening. Against the possibility that the hero of his own life might be someone else (the strictly superlative word 'own' registers just how unsettling that thought is), and against the ill omen of the day and hour, the narrator offers the brisk reassurances of our everyday world where words are tied to realities ('my life' with 'the beginning of my life') and where knowledge is established on good grounds. These reassurances however strike a hollow note in the context of the powerful sense that the narrator is radically alienated from himself on the many levels indicated above; and they are further shaken a couple of paragraphs later by the narrator's revelation that he was born with a caul, a thin membrane covering the head and face, a circumstance commonly supposed to confer second sight, good luck or magical protection against drowning. The supernatural dimension is quickly challenged however by further reminders that our world prefers more prosaic goods: the caul 'was advertised for sale, in the newspapers, at the low price of fifteen guineas...there was but one solitary bidding, and that was from an attorney connected with the bill-broking business, who offered two pounds in cash, and the balance in sherry, but declined to be guaranteed from drowning on any higher bargain'. So the advertisement was withdrawn,

and ten years afterwards, the caul was put up in a raffle down in our part of the country, to fifty members at half-a-crown a head, the winner to spend five shillings. I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused, at a part of myself being disposed of in that way. (*ibid.*, p. 50)

The caul was won by 'an old lady with a hand-basket', who paid her five shillings, 'all in halfpence', and it 'took an immense time and a great waste of arithmetic' to prove to her that she was twopence halfpenny short (*ibid.*). Part of the young narrator's being, with all its magical possibilities, is reduced to a monetary transaction that fails at the first attempt and is a caricature of itself at the second. Well may he feel 'uncomfortable and confused' at a part of himself 'being disposed of in that way' (*ibid.*).

## II      Alterity

Here, then, is a strange condition of things indeed. The strangeness here is radical and pervasive. It is strange enough to give us pause in our understanding of strangeness itself: of our opacity to ourselves, of how we are not at home here, of the condition of alterity, as it is sometimes put. If we are creatures who possess an unconscious mind, as we suppose we have learned from Freud (who was himself, remarkably, born with a caul: see Yalom, 1980, p. 70), not only can we not have full self-knowledge, full access to the contents of our consciousnesses: it may be that the very effort to achieve knowledge about ourselves brings powerful temptations to self-deception and wishful thinking. Our moral relationships with other people then have to be conducted on the basis both that those other people are not fully knowable by us and that we do not fully know ourselves: an ethics of ‘my *answerability to my neighbour-with-an-unconscious*’ (Santner, 2001, p. 9, his italics), a response to ‘the way in which the Other is disoriented in the world, destitute, divested of an identity’ (*ibid.*, p. 82).

‘Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life’: these opening words, and the sense of the uncanny, where ‘every familiar is ultimately strange’ (*ibid.*, p. 6), to which they form an introduction, can be read as the narrator acknowledging his own radical disorientation and destitution. We might be more alert to this if we recalled Dickens’ title for the original serial publication: *David Copperfield, or The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (which he never meant to be published on any account)*. Although taking your name from your father was not uncommon in the nineteenth century ‘David Copperfield the Younger’ suggests a derivative, perhaps shadowy identity. The name of the house is suggestive of blundering, perhaps blind, error, and as if to confirm this the connection with rooks is insecure, the rooks having long departed even before David’s father named the house:

‘There have not been any since we have lived here’, said my mother. ‘We thought – Mr. Copperfield thought – it was quite a large rookery; but

the nests were very old ones, and the birds have deserted them a long while’.

‘David Copperfield all over!’ cried Miss Betsey. ‘David Copperfield from head to foot! Calls a house a rookery when there’s not a rook near it, and takes the birds on trust, because he sees the nests!’ (Dickens 1974, p. 53)

By the time we reach the ironic claim that none of this was ever intended to be published, the list of substantive nouns (*History, Adventures, Experience and Observation*) begins to read like words that insist on substance because they know they have none. Rooks and similar birds (the Corvidae, including magpies and ravens) are an emblem of knowingness for Dickens, as we shall see below: their absence here confirms the innocence both of David himself, as suggested in the opening sentence, and of his dead father.

It is not easy to stay open to the disorientation or madness of the Other, nor to one’s own; in the case of other people perhaps this is because their own disorientation or alienation reminds us too much of our own. We have all kinds of ways of erecting defences against what Santner calls the ‘pulsating, agitating core in ourselves, in others’ (Santner, 2001). One familiar kind of defence is the retreat to excessive rationality, a process sometimes called metabolization, that is precisely a refusal to experience the painful feelings that are likely to come from continuing to be open and vulnerable. In the grip of this defence we seek to have *knowledge* of the Other, attempt to define and fix their identity, rather than simply (but how difficult this is) to *acknowledge* them. Various kinds of knowledge may supply the closure our vulnerability craves: a medical or quasi-medical diagnosis (eg of ‘borderline personality disorder’) reassures us that there is a problem here to be handed over to the competent specialists. Closed questions (‘How long have you been feeling like this? When exactly did it all start?’) promise straightforward answers that allow us to feel that something definite has been established and progress has been made. Perhaps we find ourselves impelled tell a story of our own, for instance of a friend who had similar issues, of how she dealt with them and how it all turned out.

### III Closure

In the case of Charles Dickens and this particular novel, ideas from psychoanalysis appear to offer a tempting form of closure. Many elements of the story, as is well known, echo episodes in Dickens' own life: David's experience working in the warehouse by the Thames strongly resembles Dickens' own childhood months in Warren's Blacking factory at Hungerford Stairs, Mr Micawber's imprisonment for debt mirrors that of Dickens' own father, and so on. The temptation is strong for Peter Ackroyd (1990). He notes (p. 565) that when Dickens was finishing *David Copperfield* he told his friend John Forster that 'I seem to be sending some part of myself into the Shadowy World'. Ackroyd comments (*ibid.*) 'never has a writer's life been so divided between wild feeling and strict control, between helpless sensations of loss or abandonment and the stern will for power and domination'.

And yet which for him was the world of shadows and which the world of reality? There are occasions when he does not seem to know and, even as he wrote the first number,<sup>1</sup> Dickens was also completing his articles on the deaths of the children at the Tooting juvenile pauper asylum. He was dealing with two kinds of child abuse one after another; the private abuse of David Copperfield at the hands of the Murdstones, and the public abuse of the abandoned children in the baby farm, the emotion induced by both spilling over into each other. (p. 567)

That there are parallels and echoes between Dickens' life and his writings, however, does not have to lead to explanation of the latter in terms of the former, nor to the inference that the strong emotions Dickens experienced arising from the difficulty of separating the two somehow supply the key to the power of *David Copperfield*. In another passage Ackroyd draws more explicit parallels. Dickens is

David being comforted by surrogate mothers, but he is also the motherless and fatherless Little Em'ly; yes, he is the prostitute Martha, too, for the rules of the school in which David Copperfield is enrolled are the same rules which Dickens applied to the 'fallen women' of Urania Cottage.<sup>2</sup> Everything thus becomes entangled, because nothing can be worked through or worked out. It would be death itself to do so, and the fate of Dickens would be that of the gorgon who on seeing its own reflection was turned to stone. This is a novel in which all his '...contradictions and inconsistencies, all those '...erratic and perverted feelings

constantly at war within his breast...’, as *Copperfield* says of himself, are projected outward, sent spinning into the shadowy world, are thus for the moment quietened but not resolved. (pp. 608-9)

Ackroyd’s language is lyrical, but it is unmistakably Freudian: what cannot be ‘worked through’, projection and shadows – as if here we held the key to the mind of Charles Dickens and, through him, to the novel; as if either could or should have any kind of key.

In a recent study significantly titled *Knowing Dickens*, Rosemarie Bodenheimer (2007) discusses what she calls ‘Dickens’ interest in ways of knowing what we don’t know, and not knowing what we do know’ (p. 14): the interest which I maintain is shown in exemplary fashion in the opening words of *David Copperfield*. Bodenheimer is ambivalent about the usefulness of a Freudian framework in understanding how Dickens thought ‘about the human capacity for self-knowledge’ (p. 6). She writes that ‘As the Victorian novelist most deeply intrigued by nineteenth-century ideas about the unconscious mind, he found ways to dramatize through his invented figures both subconscious processes and acts of self-projection’, as if Dickens was conscious of this proto-psychoanalytical framework (as if, we might say, he deployed it knowingly). She strengthens this impression when she writes that ‘Current studies of nineteenth-century physiological psychology bring Dickens into perspective as an early, if idiosyncratic, assimilator of pre-Freudian ideas about the unconscious mind...’ (p. 5). Yet in the same paragraph she notes that because Dickens did not explain these ideas in a ‘knowing narrative voice’ it was easy for his critics to attribute his distinctive way of knowing, expressed through his characters, to ‘the vagaries of a nonrational creative process’: that is to say, as if these proto-psychoanalytical terms were for the reader or critic to use in order to understand Dickens. And while she casts as problematic the practice of extrapolating from an author’s work to the psychodynamics of his or her life, she appears to welcome its revival on the grounds that the boundaries between psychoanalytic and historical approaches to interpretation are relatively loose (p. 16). While Dickens has found, in the opening of *David Copperfield*, a way to write about our internal alterity without the kind of closure that knowingness brings, Bodenheimer’s artful play with ideas from psychoanalysis – is Dickens deploying them as part of his authorial technique, or is the reader to use them in order to understand



Dickens better than he understood himself? – seems, as does the carefully ambiguous title of her book, altogether too controlled.

#### IV      **Knowingness**

When our knowledge fails us this is far from being always a matter of simple ignorance. We are creatures for whom knowledge is often coloured by what Dearden (1974) calls the ‘ethics of belief’, for whom understanding ‘is no dry light, but receives an infusion from the will and affections’ (Francis Bacon, quoted by Dearden, *ibid.*). Our epistemic vices include self-deception, wishful thinking and wilful blindness. These are all ways of ‘knowing what we don’t know, and not knowing what we do know’, to quote Bodenheimer once more. One seldom remarked-upon such vice is what I here call *knowingness*: that condition in which we hold our beliefs, whatever their truth and justifiability, with an unseemly degree of sureness or self-confidence. It is a condition that classical Greek thinkers were familiar with. For them its emblems included the Oedipus who thought his record of success (for instance, in solving the riddle of the sphinx and thus winning Jocasta, Queen of Thebes, in marriage) could unproblematically be extended to learning the truth of his own origins. It is the state of mind of many of Socrates’ interlocutors, particularly in the early dialogues, such as the young man Euthyphro who is so serenely certain of what the gods require of the righteous man that he is about to prosecute his own father for manslaughter:

*Socrates*: Good heavens, Euthyphro! And have you such a precise knowledge of piety and impiety, and of divine things in general, that...you are not afraid that you too may be doing an impious thing in bringing an action against your father?

*Euthyphro*: The best of Euthyphro, and that which distinguishes him, Socrates, from other men, is his exact knowledge of all these matters. (Plato, *Euthyphro* 4-5, Jowett’s translation, 1871)

I return below to Plato’s diagnoses of knowingness.

Now there is a particular difficulty in developing an account of knowingness, which is that the greater the perspicuity and force of the account the closer it risks coming to the condition it analyses. It is, in short, not easy to illuminate knowingness without appearing knowing. We have already seen signs of this difficulty in Bodenheimer's treatment. Richard Rorty (1989, p. 105) notes a similar difficulty in what he calls 'the problem of how to overcome authority without claiming authority' in offering a picture of human finitude. The only way to do this, Rorty thinks, is by some kind of 'indirect communication' (p. 104) such as he finds in the writing of Kierkegaard, which has the power to dissolve the claims of what Rorty calls 'systematic philosophy' without erecting another system in its place. This is for Rorty precisely the province of the ironic writer, the 'nontheorist' to use his term (*ibid.*), such as Charles Dickens.

Dickens gives us several glimpses of 'knowingness' in *David Copperfield*. An unnamed gentleman usurps David's rightful place on the Box Seat of the Canterbury coach and does permanent damage to his confidence: 'I have always considered this as the first fall I had in life... here, in the very first stage, I was supplanted by a shabby man with a squint, who had no other merit than smelling like a livery-stables, and being able to walk across me, more like a fly than a human being, while the horses were at a canter!' (Dickens 1974, p. 342). We know what we are to make of this man when we discover that he leers with 'the eye with which he didn't squint, in a very knowing manner' (*ibid.*). The dwarfish Miss Mowcher has a habit of

bringing her nose and her forefinger together...standing with her head necessarily on one side, and, with one of her sharp eyes shut up, making an uncommonly knowing face.. I never beheld anything approaching to Miss Mowcher's wink except Miss Mowcher's self-possession. She had a wonderful way too, when listening to what was said to her, or when waiting for an answer to what she had said herself, of pausing with her head cunningly on one side, and one eye turned up like a magpie's (*ibid.*, p. 386).

Perhaps most revealingly of all, when David visits the odious Uriah Heep in prison, where he is 'number Twenty Seven', and asks the warder what crime he has been committed there for, the answer is 'Fraud, forgery, and conspiracy. He and some others. He set the

others on. It was a deep plot for a large sum. Sentence, transportation for life. Twenty Seven was the knowingest bird of the lot, and had very nearly kept himself safe; but not quite' (*ibid.*, p. 929). Thus in *David Copperfield* knowingness implies slyness and cunning in contrast with innocence, the desire to have power over others, and self-aggrandisement. The ease with which it elides into wickedness is confirmed in *The Pickwick Papers* where two miscreants, about to emigrate to Demerara, are advised 'not to be too knowing in the West Indies. If you throw away this chance, you will both richly deserve to be hanged' (Dickens 1975, p. 842).

By contrast, it is the greatest compliment that can be paid to Dr Strong, the Headmaster of the Canterbury school where David becomes a pupil, that he is less knowing than the birds of the air, whose slyness consists in redoubled, reflexive knowingness: 'the stray rooks and jackdaws looking after him with their heads cocked slyly, as if they knew how much more knowing they were in worldly affairs than he' (Dickens 1974, p. 294).

Elsewhere knowingness seems to be characteristic of people who in fact lack knowledge and are, whether consciously or unconsciously, trying to conceal the fact. The literally clueless policemen in *Great Expectations* 'stood about the door of the Jolly Bargemen, with knowing and reserved looks that filled the whole neighborhood with admiration' (Dickens, 1996, p. 122). In *Our Mutual Friend* Mr Boffin asks Mr Wegg if he likes and appreciates the significance of his living arrangements. 'Why, in a general way, sir', Mr Wegg was beginning slowly and knowingly, with his head stuck on one side, as evasive people do begin' (Dickens 1979, p. 100). In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens writes of 'that knowing look which people assume when they are contemplating for the first time portraits which they ought to recognise but don't' (Dickens 1978, pp. 564-566).

Knowingness is also the distinguishing feature of people who like to think of themselves as men of the world. The appropriately named Mr Brass, again in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, recalls the maxim of his 'revered father': —“Always suspect everybody”. That's the maxim to go through life with!' Dickens is here moved to make a rare authorial comment:

With deference to the better opinion of Mr Brass, and more particularly to the authority of his Great Ancestor, it may be doubted, with humility, whether the elevating principle laid down by the latter gentleman, and acted upon by his descendant, is always a prudent one, or attended in practice with the desired results. This is, beyond question, a bold and presumptuous doubt, inasmuch as many distinguished characters, called men of the world, long-headed customers, knowing dogs, shrewd fellows, capital hands at business, and the like, have made, and do daily make, this axiom their polar star and compass. Still, the doubt may be gently insinuated. (*ibid.*, p. 609)

Without imputing to Dickens anything like a systematic theory here, we might think of his conception of knowingness as involving ignorance while appearing, or trying to appear, knowledgeable when you are not, or being street-wise in a cunning, cocky way. There are also suggestions that it includes maintaining a high degree of cynicism about human nature. All of these features come together in Dickens' savage description of the Board of the workhouse to which Oliver Twist is committed:

The members of this board were very sage, deep, philosophical men; and wheaeaeaeen they came to turn their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered—the poor people liked it! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar elysium, where it was all play and no work. ‘Oho!’ said the board, looking very knowing; ‘we are the fellows to set this to rights; we’ll stop it all, in no time’. So, they established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. (Dickens 1976, p. 55)

However nothing is quite set in stone in Dickens' vision of knowingness. The Corvidae are emblematic of the condition, with their tendency to strut and incline their heads to one side, yet the knowingness of a raven in *Barnaby Rudge* can be amusing rather than sinister:

‘Grip, Grip, Grip – Grip the clever, Grip the wicked, Grip the Knowing – Grip, Grip, Grip,’ cried the raven ... ‘I’m a devil I’m a devil I’m a devil, Never say die Hurrah Bow wow wow, Polly put the kettle on we’ll all have tea’. (Dickens 1980, p. 434)

Dickens himself owned a pet raven called Grip, of which he was fond. After his death its stuffed body was sold for a hundred and twenty pounds (Ackroyd, 1990, p. 1079).

## **V Living without answers**

I have argued above that there is a problem for the writer who identifies knowingness as a significant element in our alterity, our strangeness to ourselves and others, including the Dickens who is unavoidably the author of his texts. To put it epigrammatically: the writer had better not be too knowing about knowingness. Or to put it in a less compressed way, there is at the least a paradox in setting out a thesis – a clear and articulate thesis – to the effect that in our very knowingness we are obscure, perhaps then of all times most obscure, to ourselves. As if we were to go around confident that we are strangers to ourselves, radical alterity being as it were prescribed by the knowledgeable counsellor or psychoanalyst. To be comfortable with our own alterity (‘my counsellor says that like everybody else I’m a mess, and I’m fine with that’) would be a particularly far-reaching form of bad faith, a way of maintaining a defence against the disruptive power of the unconscious.

In his Introduction to *Wild Analysis*, a recent translation of a collection of Freud’s papers (2002), Adam Phillips shows how psychoanalysis struggles with this problem. Freud himself was naturally drawn – and regularly encouraged by his disciples – to give some explanation of ‘how to do psychoanalysis’, to supply an account of its techniques. But there is something wrong with the idea of a technique here. ‘A technique, after all, is a means devised by someone to get what they want. It makes wanting make sense. A technique is not supposed to have an unconscious’ (p. ix). That is to say, talk of technique

has its home where we seek means towards ends that are unproblematically desired and known in advance: techniques for icing a cake, say, or for carving wood. In a world permeated by the notion that everything must be transparent and accountable, that (for instance) learning outcomes can be specified in advance of teaching, it is natural to suppose that every activity and practice comes down to the exercise of the techniques and skills that are, in this instance, what are required to take us from objectives to outcomes. But, in this example, if teaching is a shared exploration where the destination is not known in advance then teaching cannot be a straightforward matter of the exercise of techniques. The same is true for making relationships where, in contrast with seduction, what counts as a good relationship is to an extent something we stand to discover in the process of forming it, and so there cannot be a *technique* for achieving it. Indeed the making of relationships with other people is the business of our lives that above all reveals how thinking of being human as essentially a matter of exercising skills and techniques gets things wrong from the start.

Phillips writes that in Freud's papers to which he is writing an Introduction

We find Freud's wish for definitive formulation of the means and ends of psychoanalysis coming up against something about the subject – the vagaries of unconscious desire – that makes such traditional forms of authority, of closure, seem somehow beside the point. As though there was something that made the more assured pronouncements about it sound silly; dogma staving off a sense of the ridiculous. (p. viii)

The error lying behind the desire for 'definitive formulation' and 'assured pronouncements' consists partly, as I put it above (Section II), in thinking that either psychoanalysis or, in Santner's phrase, my answerability to my neighbour with an unconscious, consists in knowledge rather than acknowledgement, in some kind of quasi-medical diagnosis rather than receptivity to a strangeness not in any way to be comprehended in advance. Elsewhere Phillips expresses dismay at the way psychoanalysis has become thought of as a kind of science,

as though the aim of psychoanalysis was to make people more intelligible to themselves rather than to realise how strange they are. When psychoanalysis makes too much sense, or makes sense of too much, it turns into exactly the symptom it is trying to cure: defensive knowingness. (Phillips 1997, p. 87)

We need, then, a way of realising, and of writing about, how strange we are that does not make ‘too much sense, or sense of too much’: that does not promise the wrong kind of answers or the definitive knowledge that can only lead to knowingness.

As I have suggested above (in Section IV), on one interpretation of the Platonic dialogues Plato was dealing with the same problem. If he was concerned to convey philosophical solutions or timeless doctrines – the Theory of Forms, perhaps, or the Socratic method – then perhaps we should think of the dialogue form as merely stage-setting, designed to make the doctrines more palatable. However if Plato, or Socrates, or perhaps both, saw philosophy as a kind of therapy then, as with Freud, we might wonder if this therapy is not the cure for simple ignorance: we might wonder if philosophical doctrine is not the solution. Perhaps what we need to be released from is less a matter of not knowing than of being too knowing. What the Delphic oracle declared, on this interpretation, was that Socrates was the least knowing of men.

Reading Plato’s dialogues in this way we notice that Phaedrus, in the dialogue that bears his name, is confidently following his doctor’s advice to take exercise outside the city when he meets Socrates: he is only too happy to settle for other prescriptions that are offered to him by experts. He has learned by heart the sophist Lysias’s rhetorical speech, setting out a cold, manipulative vision of human relationships. Both the lover and the one he wants to take to bed will benefit from this vision, so what more needs to be said? Phaedrus is now not just knowledgeable in this theory of relationships, as a result of Lysias’ teaching: he sees the skills with which this knowledge has equipped him as beyond criticism and as a possession to be proud of. It is the shock of Socrates’ suggestion that love is a kind of god-sent madness – a profound kind of alterity indeed – that jolts Phaedrus out of his knowingness. Theaetetus presents an instructive example of knowingness. He is a bright and promising young man, with a particular talent for

geometry. Jowett's translation reads: 'He moves surely and smoothly and successfully in the path of knowledge and enquiry; and he is full of gentleness, flowing on silently like a river of oil; at his age, it is wonderful' (*Theaetetus* 144b). What is it to have a mind that works like this, than to be too knowing?

Coming to Dickens through Plato and Freud we can see more clearly the difficulty Dickens was encountering, the difficulty of being knowing about knowingness, and the power of his way of dealing with the difficulty. It is a way of acknowledging alterity that could perhaps only be undertaken by a novelist, a story-teller or at any rate a writer, rather than a systematic philosophical thinker.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Chapter 44 of *David Copperfield* begins: 'It was a strange condition of things, the honeymoon being over, and the bridesmaids gone home when I found myself sitting down in my own small house with Dora'. Alone at last, the newly-weds struggle with their servants, with tradesmen and with all manner of practicalities. Dora's inability to manage the household accounts ('They won't come right. They make my head ache so. And they won't do anything I want') seems symptomatic of the chaos which has descended. When David attempts to reason with Dora she declares that she 'didn't marry to be reasoned with'. Reason and knowledge are in danger of failure here, and so too is acknowledgement. Dora calls David 'Doady' and asks him to think of her as his 'Child-wife': where there might be acknowledgement there is instead fantasy. Well may David's aunt describe them as 'a pair of babes in the wood' (*ibid.*).

David felt 'I could have wished my wife had been my counsellor', less either to know or acknowledge him than as one 'endowed with power to fill up the void which somewhere seemed to be about me' (*ibid.*). So strong is his sense of confusion that even the void is only 'somewhere', a void of seeming. This is a cloud not of knowingness but of unknowing. 'David' writes, 'I search my breast, and I commit its secrets, if I know them, without any reservation to this paper' (*ibid.*). We might dwell a little on the phrase, 'if I know them', that echoes the marvellous diffidence of the novel's opening, and dwell too on the oddity of writing what you do not entirely know 'without reservation'. In the same



chapter 'David' tells us that he 'wrote a good deal now, and was beginning in a small way to be known as a writer' (*ibid.*). He writes, then, a good deal of what he does not entirely know. How very productive is his unknowingness, and the mystery that he is to himself.<sup>4</sup>

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> ie the first of the serial issues in which *David Copperfield* was first published.

<sup>2</sup> A charitable enterprise which Dickens supported.

<sup>3</sup> It is more and more coming to be accepted that despite the remarks in the *Phaedrus* about the priority of the living word over writing, and the expulsion of the poets from the ideal *polis* in *The Republic*, we get Plato wrong from the outset if we do not read his texts as primarily those of a writer rather than what we would now think of as a systematic philosopher. See eg Statkiewicz, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to the journal's anonymous reviewers for their very helpful criticisms of an earlier version of this paper.